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Tips on Transition

By Theodore C. Sorensen

Every Presidential transition begins with the incoming and departing Presidents vowing complete cooperation between staffs. That vow is generally kept. But the views of the departing team, which has no future role, have comparatively little impact. The more urgent need is for open channels between the incoming Presidential appointees and the continuing Government bureaucracy. That is more difficult, particularly in foreign affairs.

During the Truman-Eisenhower transition, Secretary of State-designate John Foster Dulles reiterated General Eisenhower's campaign pledge to "roll back" the Iron Curtain and "liberate" Eastern Europe. Almost simultaneously, a holdover State Department official publicly scoffed at the pledge, certain it was unrealistic. Events proved him right, but neither ally nor adversary could determine what American policy was that week.

During the Eisenhower-Kennedy transition, a Joint Chiefs of Staff subcommittee submitted a crucial memorandum recommending alternatives on Cuba. Months later, a secret investigative report filed by Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor on the Bay of Pigs debacle concluded that the memorandum, which might have changed minds, had apparently been "lost in the activities arising out of the change in administration."

During the Johnson-Nixon transition, the American representative to the Paris peace talks on Vietnam met with the President-elect and emerged to state, with Richard M. Nixon's aide beside him, that Mr. Nixon would send his own observer to Paris. World capitals took notice. Mr. Nixon later denied it.

What accounts for these communication gaps? Old Washington hands have watched half a dozen Presidents come and go, with their campaign slogans and public-relations gimmicks, each one arriving in hope and departing in pain. They are skeptical of new appointees who hope to change the world in the first 10 days but are unable to decipher Federal Registerese. They were amused by Jimmy Carter's pledge to abolish hundreds of agencies and by Mr. Nixon's writing 66,000 "Who's Who" entrants to seek new appointees. No doubt some of these top civil servants have been less than fully communicative with each set of newcomers.

But sometimes the fault lies with the newcomers. Some act out of haste or confusion, some out of arrogance. Some begin with an unconcealed mistrust of bureaucrats. The best-prepared Cabinet members on Mr. Eisenhower's Inauguration Day were Treasury Secretary George M. Humphrey and Joseph M. Dodge, Director of the Bureau of the Budget, both having made clear to the career staffs they inherited that no purges were planned and that all would be deemed useful until proved otherwise. Mr. Dulles, though not a disciple of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, conveyed to his department an attitude of deep suspicion; the result was neither harmony nor efficiency.

Let us hope the new Reagan national-security team will forget any campaign rhetoric about a Foreign Service of fuzzy-minded incompetents insufficiently alert to the Soviet menace and consistently outnegotiated. Our diplomatic corps, from career ambassadors to consuls, is full of talented men and women. If properly identified, encouraged, and called upon, they can be invaluable. So can the career staffs at the Pentagon, Agency for International Development, and Central Intelligence Agency. Any bureaucracy needs occasional pruning and prodding, but, as Presidents Johnson and Nixon discovered, distrusting a bureaucracy only diminishes its responsiveness and productivity.

One signal of trust toward the national-security career services is a new President's decision on the "little State Department" in the White House. President-elect Carter pledged to cut it but failed. Every President needs an Assistant for National Security Affairs to coordinate reports from State, Defense, the C.I.A., Congress and others. But an "assistant" is not an administrator running his own operation, competing for supremacy with the departments yet unaccountable to Congress.

The danger of a President-elect's placing too little trust in the national-security bureaucracy is outweighed only by the danger of his placing too much trust in its specialists. Mr. Kennedy was initially impressed by those briefing him on the Bay of Pigs scheme. In the heady atmosphere of infallibility that follows successful campaigns, it is hard not to be impressed by the secret maps, arcane terminology, gold braid, and experts' crisp, confident manner. Success is in the air, failure is unthinkable. Thus, he stumbled. So will future new Presidents — unless they remember that the military, intelligence, and diplomatic specialist, for all his indispensable knowledge, sometimes lacks the broader, more balanced perspective necessary for Presidential decisions.

Mr. Reagan did not win the votes of most Federal employees in the District of Columbia and Maryland. But as a skilled communicator, he has in the transition period a more important opportunity to win their confidence.

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